

THE DRAGON OF THE DARK HEART



Once there was a kingdom that was ruled by a ten-year-old boy. He was a cruel and selfish boy, and his subjects were all very unhappy. He did not permit the children in his kingdom to have any toys, and if he heard of a boy or girl making themselves something fun to play with out of a chopstick and a rubber band, or if a girl made a doll out of mud and dressed it with twigs and leaves, he would ride out himself and demand that the toys be turned over at once. With every such toy he seized he hoped to find pleasure; he wanted to play with the toys himself. But another boy's marvelous invention was only a chopstick and a rubber band to him; another girl's princess doll just a handful of mud and sticks and leaves. Each toy he took inevitably ended up in his dark, cold dungeon, far below the ground.

In the neighboring kingdom, there was a wise old king. When he was not writing proclamations or knighting his subjects, he entertained the children of his kingdom with shadow puppet shows. One day as he was traveling through the boy-king's kingdom, this wise old king saw the frustration and despair in the faces of the boy-king's subjects and could stand it no longer. That evening he set out at nightfall, determined to make it right.

He crept up to the castle walls just as the stars were beginning to twinkle in the sky, and he hid himself below the boy-king's window and began to hoot like an owl. The boy-king was startled and looked around him in fright.

"What is that?" he asked. In response, the old king merely hooted again. The moon suddenly burst out from behind the clouds, and when the boy-king peeped tentatively out of his window he saw, on the opposite castle wall, an enormous black dragon, flapping its wings ominously. Certain that the great, savage, black dragon was about to attack his castle, the boy-king trembled with terror.

"What do you want?" he cried. "Ask it of me and you will have it! I will give you anything you want!"

But there was no reply. The boy sat against the wall under his window and quivered and cried as the great black dragon continued to thrash his silent black wings on the far castle wall.

The next morning, pink-eyed and wild with sleeplessness, the boy-king called the old king to the castle.

"You rule a kingdom," he said. "Were you ever frightened by a ferocious, flapping black dragon?" The king's eyes grew wide, and he allowed his hands to shake as he reached for the boy-king.

"The dragon is here?" he asked with a quaking voice. "Here?"

"You know of him then?"

"I know of him," the old king said, gravely. "I waged war against him once. I thought he had been vanquished."

“He was vanquished from your kingdom perhaps,” said the petulant boy, “but in vanquishing him from yours, you’ve drive him straight here to mine. He’s your problem. How do I send him back?”

The king looked at the boy with a grim face, and was hesitant to say.

“You must tell me!” the boy demanded. “I am the boy-king and you are in my kingdom now!”

“O.K., the old king relented at last. “I will tell you. I got the dragon to go away with toys.”

“Toys! What do you mean, toys!”

“He is the Dragon of the Dark Heart. He will prey on any kingdom where there is no joy or laughter or play. I commanded all of my subjects to spend at least half an hour a day playing with their toys, so the streets of my kingdom are always filled with laughter. The Dragon of the Dark Heart cannot thrive around laughter. He was gone within an hour of my proclamation.”

The boy considered this. Then he called for his guards. “Have all the toys from the dungeon brought up and distributed among my subjects,” he ordered. “And they are to be played with! Not a moment shall go by when someone is not playing and laughing. That is my proclamation. Tell everyone!”

From that moment on, the Dragon of the Dark Heart never again appeared on the boy-king’s castle wall, though the wise old king from the neighboring kingdom came through the boy-king’s kingdom every once in a while, and always on a night with a full moon, just to make sure that the dragon wasn’t needed again.

1. What is the event that causes the boy-king to change his mind about the toys?

2. What is “the Dragon of the Dark Heart” really? Use details from the text about the wise old king to support your answer.
